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THE FEMALE IN PUBLIC RECREATION

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THE FEMALE IN PUBLIC RECREATION

Human potential finds an outlet in many forms of intellectual, artistic and physical pursuit. The declining proportion of time spent at the work place affords individuals a greater amount of time for leisure activities.

Females do not participate in recreational programs to the same extent as men. Society's attitudes toward the female in public recreation as well as home and child care responsibilities, lack of access to physically active programs and lack of concentrated time periods are determinants in repressing female participation in recreation.

Recreation is defined by Dr. William Theobald, former Chairman of the Department of Recreation at the University of Waterloo, as the constructive and pleasurable use of leisure in voluntarily chosen activities, encompassing everything from hockey to macrame. Physically active forms of recreation, usually defined as sport, are significant contributors to the fitness levels of the individual. The general lack of female participation in these activities has resulted in a corresponding low level of fitness. Instead we find female domination of 'soft' activities like arts and crafts.

Dr. Theobald, in a 1976 research study, "The Female in Public Recreation" indicated that, "female participation in sports activities is not encouraged by the majority of recreation departments. On the contrary, there are far less facilities available, programmes accessible, leadership

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provided and publicity given to sports activities for the female sex."

The lack of access to resources is compounded by the special problems faced by females of all ages. Women with families are the group most poorly served in recreation, especially working mothers who have so little leisure time. Housewives with children at home are not free to participate during the day, and women who have commitments to both the work force and the home find that their leisure is available only in small blocks of time.

Dr. Theobald suggests that programs for pre-school children which run concurrently with those offered to the adult female would be one solution. The factor most inhibiting to the participation in recreation of women with families is the lack of provision for child care.

Cultural myths surrounding women's participation in recreation, particularly in sport, are major hurdles for females of all ages. From the time the female is young, she is given to understand that sport is undesirable and unpopular activity for her sex. Abby Hoffman discussed these myths in "About Face: towards a positive image of women in sports", a publication for the Ontario Status of Women Council.

The female is lead to believe that she is not physically capable of being a good athlete, nor is she emotionally stable

enough to withstand the rigors of sport. Therefore, it is assumed that females are not likely to enjoy sport.

In fact, women possess all the physical requisites necessary to become successful athletes and to enjoy a wide variety of sport and fitness activity.

Would-be female athletes are frequently told that if they persist in strenuous activity, they will become muscle-bound and therefore less attractive. Surely a person who is fit and alive to their physical potential is more attractive than someone who has no awareness of their physical being at all!

Another myth which testifies that women are injury prone, is sometimes used to exclude the female from contact sports such as hockey. If people of equal ability play together and if violent contact is eliminated by rule, there is no reason why women should not play contact sports.

Sport most definitely does not cause damage to the reproductive organs; rather, the athletic female will have easier delivery and fewer complications arising from pregnancy.

There are some who deny the existence of barriers to women's involvement in recreation, claiming instead that lack of desire is the real culprit. Studies in other societies suggest, however, that the female is not naturally predisposed against physical activity. Until the opportunities currently

available for males are available to females, it doesn't make much sense to say "they don't want to play".

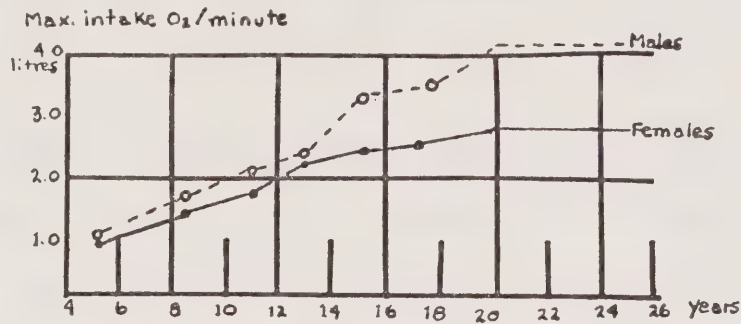
In fact, there is an illustrious history of women's sport in Canada. We are generally not aware that the Depression, the aftermath of World War II and the rise of commercial sport virtually wiped out the progress of women's sport. This fine tradition of female involvement must be made known to men and women in Canadian society.

Our schools provide a fertile ground for change, since it is from the standards set by parents and the lessons learned in school that children adopt their behaviour patterns. The school system usually has four short-comings;

- . a generally low priority is given to physical education
- . there is a failure to develop acceptable concepts and standards of fitness and physical development which should be applied to young people in their growth years
- . physical education and sport programs generally tend to reinforce rather than counteract sex bias
- . there is an over-emphasis on competitive sports and games

It is little wonder that we find that cardiovascular fitness of females falls dramatically after age 10 while that of males improves appreciably.

Physical Fitness and Physical Development of the Female



The value representing "maximal oxygen intake per kilogram body weight" is commonly used as the vital indicator of cardiovascular fitness. The graph shows the values attributed to a large sample of males and females at various ages. The values are very similar for boys and girls up to age 9 at which point the values of boys level off followed by a five years of appreciable improvement. The values of girls by contrast fall dramatically after age 10 and by the time adulthood is reached the value is barely more than that achieved at age 5!

....page 24, About Face: towards a positive image of women in sports

Even when "school is out", community use of these facilities may reinforce rather than counteract sex bias. As long as programs sponsored by supposedly progressive communities segregate boys and girls and stream them into traditional sex roles, the plight of the female in recreation will not change. Last year, for example, Hollycrest Community School in Etobicoke, offered courses in baseball and basketball for boys, and hairstyling and modern dance for girls.

The special problems of the female in recreation are perpetuated by the relative absence of female models in participatory and leadership roles in public recreation. A Princeton study showed that "girls have a difficult time assuming leadership roles partly because there are few

women leaders on whom to model themselves, and partly because society treats such women as deviants". A second study, conducted in Alberta by Linda Kelly, demonstrated that participation of mothers in sport is likely to be a prime factor in influencing her daughter's initial sporting interests. The "second generation effect" is clearly in evidence. Dr. Theobald's study of the Ontario recreation community revealed that of those surveyed eighty-five per cent (full-time administrators) are men. The majority of women in recreation are holding low status, low paying jobs. The same study showed that almost sixty per cent of those surveyed felt that the fact that the recreation field is dominated by men causes problems for women. More than forty per cent of respondents believe that recreation administrators are not aware of the needs, desires, and potential of females in the recreation field. These findings coupled with Dr. Theobald's assertion that recreation administrators are reactive, rather than active, leads to distorted programming in public recreation. "In some small communities, arenas are monuments while the local library is starving".

The conclusion is clear - women must bring about change. Men won't.

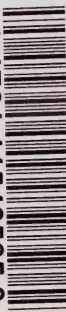
RECOMMENDATIONS:

- . Physical education should be a daily part of the school program
- . The emphasis in physical education programs should shift to the development of cardiovascular fitness
- . Mass fitness testing should be carried out regularly in the schools and remedial programs implemented
- . School boards should be responsible for ensuring an equitable distribution of resources between boys' and girls' physical education departments and the boys' and girls' inter-school sports programs
- . Women should be encouraged to become involved in coaching, training officiating functions in school and community recreation programs
- . Local governments should evaluate their programs in order to provide a more balanced schedule between sports and games and other cultural and recreational activities, available to all community residents
- . Either programs for young children should run concurrently with adult programs, or child care facilities should be established in conjunction with recreation centres
- . Training seminars should be held at regular, frequent intervals in order to familiarize community recreation staff with the needs and potential of the female in recreation
- . Affirmative action programs should be implemented in all municipalities to ensure that women have an opportunity to fill administrative positions in recreation, and to serve on recreation committees or boards

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